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**COMING MONTHS BRING PEAK TIME FOR SEASONAL AFFECTIVE DISORDER  
(SAD)**

MONTGOMERY – Besides ushering in cooler temperatures and holiday cheer, the months of December, January and February are peak times for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). SAD is a mood disorder associated with depression and related to seasonal variations in light. It affects nearly half a million people anywhere from the months of September and April. Depressions are usually mild to moderate, but some can be severe. SAD can be diagnosed after three consecutive winters of symptoms, if they are also followed by complete remission in the spring and summer months. Mental Health America provides a list of the following symptoms:

- Depression: misery, guilt, loss of self-esteem, hopelessness
- Anxiety: tension and inability to tolerate stress
- Overeating: especially craving starchy and sweet foods, resulting in weight gain
- Lethargy: feeling of fatigue and inability to carry out normal routine
- Social withdrawal: irritability and desire to avoid social contact.

SAD tends to affect women more, as three out of four sufferers are women. The main onset appears anywhere between the ages of 18-30, but more typically in the early twenties. The severity of SAD can be traced to a person's vulnerability to the disorder, linked to having at least one close relative with a psychiatric condition, usually severe depressive disorder or alcohol abuse. Interestingly, SAD is extremely rare in those living within 30 degrees latitude of the equator.

Causes of SAD have been traced to seasonal light variations in humans, as well as levels of melatonin. As seasons change, there is a shift in our "biological clocks" that can cause us to be out of "step" with our normal schedules. Melatonin, a sleep-related hormone that may also cause symptoms of depression, also produced at increased levels in the dark. Therefore, when days are shorter and darker, the production of the hormone increases.

There are a variety of treatments and treatment levels for those suffering from SAD. Light therapy, antidepressants, or a combination of both if symptoms are severe, are effective in relieving symptoms. For mild symptoms, spending time outdoors during the day or arranging homes and workplaces to receive more sunlight may prove helpful. Some people often say they have "the winter blues," which in fact is a milder form of SAD, but the main thing to remember

is if depressive symptoms are severe enough to significantly affect one's daily living, contact a mental health professional.

### RESOURCES

Visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) Web site at [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org) for more information about more information about SAD.

Mental Health America provides information about symptoms and therapies for SAD at their Web site, [www.mentalhealthamerica.net](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net).

Information on mental illness services in the state of Alabama can be obtained by contacting the DMH/MR Mental Illness Division at (334) 242-3642 or visit us online at [www.mh.alabama.gov](http://www.mh.alabama.gov).

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